

DMC Alps Meet 2013 – Chamonix (July 26th – August 11th)

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Fri 26th

After weeks of planning and strategic packing of gear, Helen and I arrived at Les Arolles campsite in Chamonix around 1am in the middle of the night. This wasn't our intention, it was our transfer that was delayed, having actually arrived in Geneva from Manchester ahead of schedule. We found a pitch and the busy campsite and quietly set up camp which would be our home for the next two and a half weeks. We would later be joined for a week by Mike, Dean and Dave but had the first couple of days to ourselves.



It was Helen's first Alpine climbing trip and having mastered crampons in winter conditions in Custs Gully in the lakes was keen to get out, putting her full trust in my planning and ability that I'd learnt from previous trips.

The first morning we woke to perfect clear weather, with views of Mont Blanc and the Brevant. We inspected the tent we'd erected in the dark a few hours before then headed into town for provisions and camping gas. Later

that afternoon we visited Gaillands on the train for a lazy afternoon sports climbing – a beautiful roadside crag with a range of grades overlooked by Mont Blanc. We did two routes before returning to the tent.

Sat 27th

After an early start we took the train north from Chamonix to the hamlet of Le Buet to climb the mountain of the same name. Although classed as a relatively straightforward walk on gentle slopes, the route provided plenty of excitement. Firstly, the height gain (1,730m), and requirement



to traverse a number of snowfields. I'd investigated the possibility of doing a circular route but opted to do the out and back which proved to be the choice for most, following the path to the Refuge de la Pierre à Bérard (around half way) then steeper across snow slopes and the final summit ridge. The section to the refuge follows the Vallon de Bérard which was straight forward following a small stream in the shady valley - very picturesque, with the summits of the Aiguille Rouge towering above us. After lunch at the refuge, the path steepened and approached the first of a number of snow fields were encountered where we saw a number of Ibex or Chamois that came pretty close – probably after our baguettes. Following the tracks of others, the snow was soft enough not to warrant crampons – this was good as we didn't them with us. Approaching the summit (3,096m) we began to feel the altitude which proved to be great acclimatization for adventures to come.

The views from the top were breath-taking, providing 360 degree views across the range, including Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn. After a while taking photos of the views we retraced our steps to the start, taking in easy, sliding down the steeper sections (on bums), where walking poles or an axe would have been very useful! Close to the end of the walk we visited the cascade Pierre à Bérard – well worth a visit alone where a small path leads to a newly constructed walkway suspended over the falls. We returned to the campsite to find Mike, Dave and Dean had arrived.

Sun 28th

The weather was forecast to turn towards the afternoon, so the previous evening whilst Helen cooked tea I consulted the guide books for half-day options we could fit into the morning. We opted for the Aiguille de L'M which involved taking the first car up the Midi lift to the half-way station then traversing from Lac Bleu over a series of glaciers and moraines towards the Nantllions Glacier. The



going was tough, over large sharp rocks with the path difficult to follow in sections and to that end would recommend others approached via the balcony route. Finally at the glacier we roped up and fitted our crampons and looked over to the route, the lower section looked horrendously loose, but we decided to check it out. We descended onto the ice, traversing the glacier towards the rock wall on its northern flank, once here we took off our crampons and began to ascend a series of fixed ladders to reach the foot of the loose couloir extending to the Col de la Buche. Fortunately, the ladders meant we avoided most of the loose lower section. From the col the climbing began with a series of scrambling and easy climbing up to grade 3, presenting us with fine views across the Mer de Glace and onto the Aig. Verte.. After several pitches of interesting climbing we were on the top

(2,844m) overlooking Chamonix, again with stunning views, closely followed by a German party who coincidentally were our neighbours on the campsite! From the summit we returned to the col via a series of abseils from in-situ bolts and had lunch with a resident marmot and guided party before reversing the ladders back to the glacier. Whilst descending the ladders we witnessed a large rock fall from high up on the Nantillions which travelled down the glacier with a series of thuds, crossing our intended path, coming close to the aforementioned guided party, reminding us of the dangers of the Alps. The weather didn't turn out too bad in the end, so we walked out by the balcony route to the Mer de Glace before returning to Chamonix alongside the railway.

Mon 29th

The promised rain finally arrived so we had an enforced rest day – solid rain. We spent most the day in Mike's tent drinking tea - as he had chairs (luxury). That evening the rain became more showery so Mike, Dean and Dave headed to Gaillands to bag a couple of routes. Helen and I were intending to join them but it started raining again so didn't.

Tue 30th



After the weather had written off the previous day we were keen to get out so took the bus to the Col des Montets to walk into the Aiguille d'Argentiere – an impressive miniature pinnacle lined with sports routes of every grade with the backdrop of the high mountains. Waiting patiently, behind a number of other groups we took the easiest line (grade 4) up the shoulder, onto the summit.

Not feeling satisfied, we decided to do a number of the single pitch sports routes on the wall opposite, before opting to climb the fantastic 4 pitch slab route (La fee des Druides 5+) on immaculate granite. The route, rising and traversing slabs leftwards seemed to go on forever with move-after-move of balancing moves, running out 4 full 60m rope lengths and

requiring some creative prusik derived quick-draw - because 12 wasn't enough.

Wed 31st

It was time to do a high mountain route so today we planned to walk in to the Albert Premier Refuge with the intention of climbing the Aiguille du Tour the following day – this would prove to be an excellent option for Helens first Alpine peak. After a fairly late start spent sorting the gear, perfecting our crevasse rescue and numerous unsuccessful attempts at trying to contact the refuge we set off. As we couldn't confirm a bed in the hut, we decided to use the money



we'd saved to take the lift to the Col de Balme and bivi at a spot around the refuge. On arrival it was clear that the refuge was undergoing significant renovations – although no excuse for not answering the phone, we probably did benefit though as it was surprisingly quiet. We continued up to find a good bivi spot, scoped out the first section of the route for the next day (as we'd be leaving in the dark) and settled down for the night, watching the sun set over the Aiguilles Rouges.

Thu 1st



We woke around 3.30am, just as the first people were leaving the hut heading in the direction of the Aig. Du Chardonnet. We packed up our gear and departed – still dark in the direction of the Aiguille du Tour, firstly descending onto the glacier then following snow slopes to a col before tackling the bergschrund and final rock scramble from the Switzerland side to gain the south peak summit (3,542m). We were first to the top, but later joined by a guided German party who we'd

overtaken on the final snow slopes. Again, the views across the high-altitude landscape looking across the Swiss Alps were amazing, evoking thoughts of future adventures. After taking the obligatory photos we reversed the scramble, put on our crampons and returned to the refuge via the less frequented Col du Midi to complete the traverse route (F). We then made our way back to Chamonix to open birthday presents at the campsite followed by a lovely meal in town – what an amazing birthday!

Fri 2nd

Today we decided to join Mike, Dave and Dean for a multi-pitch sport route on the Brevant – taking an early lift to the half-way station. The route (La Somone 5a) linking together a series of buttresses, including a knife edge arête and abseil was good value, topping out near to the Brevant summit. Helen and I went first, followed closely by the others, and at the top proceeded to the summit for refreshments!

Sat 3rd

It was Mike, Dean, and Dave's last day so decided to be sociable and all headed to climb the multi-pitch granite sport routes at Vallorcine – it was also Dean's birthday which meant more cake! On arrival the crag was mobbed, seemingly every local climber arrived to climb in the early morning shade. Helen and I formed a queue to climb and lovely multi-pitch route on the right hand side of the crag, dodging the kids abbing off the first pitch. The grades here seemed much harder than elsewhere in the valley, perhaps the different style, although the contradiction of grades within the book (text and topo) did not fill us with confidence.



By the time we'd walked off the top, descending the ladders (no abseiling allowed unless you're French), the sun was warming the crag and the crowds had melted away. We decided to climb another route that Mike, Dean and Dave had just done, only to get completely spanked in the top layback groove of the third pitch. A number of attempts, followed by the successful lasso of the bolt, (to form a top rope) meant I was able to continue without the risk of breaking my ankles. Discussions ensued with Dean afterwards - who had lead this pitch, insisting the secret was to exit the layback and traverse the delicate wall to the left. Mike and Dave were unconvinced and had proceeded, as I'd done up the layback.

Sun 4th



Mike, Dave and Dean packed up early to in preparation for the long drive back to the UK. Helen and I set out to climb the Petit Aiguille Verte (3,508m), a subsidiary peak of the impressive Aiguille Verte. This peak provides a useful introduction route (PD) and whilst easily accessible from the Grand Montets lift, must not be underestimated, requiring the techniques of traversing steep snow and high-altitude mixed rock sections. This didn't seem to deter the French who were

treating it as a family outing, consisting Pere, Mere et deux enfants. The views from the summit were amazing, offering an insight of lines on the neighbouring tower of Les Drus. From the summit the route was reversed, returning to the cable car station for departure to the valley, however we'd decided to return to the half-way station, following the route from the col via the Argentiere Glacier, providing an interesting decent on snow and ice. Unfortunately we missed the last car by around half an hour so ended up walking all the way out down a well-marked track.



Mon 5th

Today we decided to take a rest day, but as I don't do rest days we headed to Chamonix swimming baths spending most of the day in the outdoor pools, enjoying the exceptional weather. I also saw this as an opportunity to take along my Thermarest in an attempt to locate the annoying leak that'd formed leaving me sleeping on the ground for the last couple of hours each night. In the changing rooms we noticed a sign indicating that shorts were



forbidden so I set too using safety pins from the first-aid kit to transform my shorts into something that resembled speedos. Unfortunately, (for me) the French were keen on enforcing the rule and after taking only a number of steps from the cubicle, was pounced up-on by an attendant, and with a shake of the head was sent back to get changed. Undeterred, and reluctant to purchase a single use pair from the vending machine, I headed back to the campsite to find a pair of tight fitting thermal boxers which fitted the bill, enabling me to regain access to the pool. As for the Thermarest, it too nearly got us evicted from the pool. I don't think the lifeguard understood my plight! Instead I located the hole using one of the water troughs in town.

Tue 6th



Following a good night's sleep on a fully inflated Thermarest we were keen to get out before the forecast rain arrived. We decided to take the Brevant lift again to the half way station, this time walking north along the traversing route (part of the Tour du Mont Blanc) through the Aiguilles Rouge, passing Lac Blanc and the Aigulette d'Argentiere - which we'd climbed the previous week. The route was busy with backpackers but most enjoyable, offering perfect views across the

Chamonix valley, directly over the Mont Blanc range allowing us to scope out the approach to objectives we were looking at later in the week. Nearing the end of the walk we approached the

Aiguillette d'Argentiere and although dehydrated it would have been rude not to climb again, so we did, this time taking hero shots of us on the summit.

Wed 7th

The forecast rain arrived as planned so we had a good lie in followed by a visit into town to a creperie we'd had our eyes on.

Thu 8th

Rain again, however did begin to clear towards the afternoon so went for a short walk along the valley, stopping to watch the raging torrent of water and rapids. That evening we headed for the cinema in town to watch an English spoken film.

Fri 9th



The remnants of the previous days rain was still hanging in the valley despite a forecast for a clear day. We were hoping to get the Index chair lift into the Aiguille Rouges for a couple of days with our bivi gear to climb a couple of routes including the traverse of the Crochues and the Aiguille de la Perseverance. Unfortunately, the cloud base hadn't lifted as expected so we headed for a café a waited for the drizzle to stop. After an hour we'd

waited long enough so headed for the lift and into the cloud with the hope the cloud would lift. We began the walk from the top station to the Col des Crouches, marking the start of the Crouches Traverse (3c), unfortunately the cloud hadn't thinned at all so we decided to wait it out on the lea side of the col. We waited, and waited, and then at around 5pm the cloud began to lift and break. Comforted by having our bivi gear with us we decided that we still had time to do the route so set out on the ridge leaving the col to climb the first rock pitch to gain the main ridge towards the summit peak. The lifting cloud and setting sun made for some atmospheric conditions with beautiful light having the reputedly busy route entirely to ourselves. From the summit the traverse turned more ridge-like, resembling a harder more exposed Crib Goch, before dropping to a small col where we descend onto snow slopes towards Lac Blanc. The onset of darkness meant we took an early bivi above Lac Blanc which was cold and icy but fantastic watching the stars.

Sat 10th



After a patchy night's sleep, fighting the cold the sun finally appeared above the mountains to warm us through before we packed up camp and continued our decent to Lac Blanc and the refuge for a cup of tea. We walked a short distance, depositing our bivi gear before heading out to climb the isolated Aiguille de la Perseverance (2,899m) – what Rebuffat describes as one of the finest summits of the Aiguille Rouges.

The route is approached by traversing slopes to the base of large, steep scree debris which seemed to take an age to reach the base of the route. The route itself (Arete S Integrale), consisting 9 pitches up to 4c was quite easy to follow, having bolted belays, otherwise was mainly trad gear. The rock was mainly sound, and due to its remoteness, very quiet with not another climber in sight.

We reached the summit after around two hours of climbing, enjoyed the intermittent views before taking two airy abseils to the Col de la Perseverance. From here we decided to re-ascend to summit the Aiguille des Chamois (2,902m), rather than descend the aforementioned couloir and scree to the start. The traverse of the Chamois proceeded along the northern arête consisting three wonderful pitches; however, the quality of rock approaching the summit was horrendous and very loose. The decent from the summit proved to be an exciting scramble, requiring some route finding to find the easiest line, leading to another scree slope leading back in the direction of Lac Blanc.



We had intended on catching the lift down to Chamonix, however the route had taken longer than expected, forcing another nights bivi near Lac Blanc. Other than running out of food, this wasn't a problem and we were rewarded with a sunset lit Mont Blanc, followed by an amazing show of shooting stars.

Sun 11th

We woke early, as the sun rose over the Aguille Verte, scrapping the ice that had formed overnight on the outside of our bivi bags. Having eaten all our supplies, we were keen to get going, so packed up before heading out on the traversing path back to the Index lift, Chamonix then onto our favourite café for tea and pastries for breakfast.

All good things have to come to an end, and this was it, home time and back to the UK. We spent the morning carefully packing our kit, trying to remember how we'd packed it over two weeks previously. What a fantastic trip, great company, great weather and plenty of adventure.

